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Study: Kentucky has high fatality rate among teen drivers

LOUISVILLE, Ky. -- Alex Jones has been in two wrecks and said he's still gaining experience as a driver.

The 17-year-old Fairdale High School senior said he wouldn't be bothered by stricter state restrictions.

"I don't think it would be that bad," he said. "It might help."

But, efforts at tighter restrictions have failed in recent years, even though Kentucky ranks as the ninth deadliest state for youth-related driving fatalities.

For every 100,000 Kentucky drivers aged 16-20 in 2003, there were 90 fatal crashes involving such a driver, compared to a national average of 68, according to the study by the National Safety Council and the physician-led End Needless Death on Our Roadways. The study found that teens represent 6.3 percent of Kentucky drivers but were involved in 17 percent of all fatal crashes in 2003.

John Ulczycki, transportation director of the National Safety Council, said Kentucky's rate is a result of several factors. Kentucky's graduated teen licensing isn't as strict as most states'; driver's education is no longer offered in most schools; and there's no seat-belt law allowing police to stop motorists solely for failing to wear a seat belt, Ulczycki said.

Ultimately, he said, "it's parents' responsibility."

Alex Jones' mother, Cathy, knows that is the case.

"It's nerve-racking," said Jones, referring to the worries of a new driver's parent. "You let him go out, and every time the phone rings, you just cringe."

State Rep. Tom Burch, D-Buechel, failed to persuade the 2005 General Assembly to create an "intermediate license" that would be required for six months after the initial learner's permit expires. It would bar 16-year-olds from driving between midnight and 6 a.m. and limit unrelated teen passengers to one or two.

Also, it would require 60 hours of supervised driving time with no violations before a full license was granted, Burch said.

"There's all kinds of things we should be doing. ... Kentucky's dragging its feet," said Burch, who said he plans to introduce his bill again later this month.

Opponents argued that there wasn't enough money to administer the changes, although no cost estimate has been calculated.

The graduated licensing laws extend the learning period through restrictions on things such as night driving or passengers and are one way states have tried to lower the fatality rate among new drivers.

They've been adopted with varying levels of strictness in 46 states between 1993 and 2003. And during that time, auto deaths involving 16-year-olds declined by 26 percent, according the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

In 1996, Kentucky extended the new driver learner's permit from 30 days to six months,

barring teens from driving between midnight and 6 a.m. with some exceptions and requiring someone at least 21 years old to be present at all times.

That's helped reduce deaths, but more could be done, said Mike Park, director of Kentucky's graduated licensing program.

For Burch, his proposal has a personal motivation. His granddaughter, Cassie Burch, was 17 and an inexperienced driver when she lost control of her pickup on the Snyder Freeway in 1999, flipping four times. Although she wore a seat belt, she died from head injuries.

Cassie had been on her way home from one of her two jobs, caring for horses at a stable.

"Maybe she was changing the disc. We don't know," Burch said. "She was easily distracted."

Some teens bristle at the label of being high-risk drivers, but others, such as Jamelle Moran, a 17-year-old senior at Fern Creek High, said he realized the importance of driving experience in April, when he veered off the road and hit a pole after reaching for a fallen cell phone. He was driving slowly and wasn't hurt, but knows he could have been.

"It was a lesson," he said.

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